

FIRE AND ICE: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON LADAKH

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Picturesque Ladakh has been on edge ever since it was [carved out as a Union Territory \(UT\)](#) from the erstwhile State of Jammu and Kashmir in 2019. After a brief period of jubilation over the status of a separate UT, a long-pending demand from Buddhists of the region, the locals have only grown restive. An agitation demanding the inclusion of the region in the Sixth Schedule under Article 244 of the Constitution (special protection to tribal populations) boiled over last week after [Sonam Wangchuk](#), a Magsaysay winner, [went on a fast](#). Soon after its creation as a UT in August 2019, Ladakh came under a bureaucracy that the local population found to be hostile and irresponsible. The constant tussle between locals, elected representatives of two Hill Councils of Kargil and Leh, and the bureaucracy only widened over the months. Leh's political and religious bodies formed the Leh Apex Body (LAB) in 2020, headed by former BJP leader and former Member of Parliament Thupstan Chhewang (he is also an elected president of the influential Ladakh Buddhist Association). In Kargil district, political parties, including the National Conference and the Congress, and Shia Muslim-affiliated seminaries joined hands in November 2020 to form the Kargil Democratic Alliance (KDA). Kargil, unlike Leh, is for re-joining with the erstwhile J&K State and restoration of its special status under Article 370.

Despite the differences in their political stands, LAB and the KDA are now together over common goals. They have put forth four major demands before the Centre, which include restoration of full-fledged Statehood, constitutional safeguards under the Sixth Schedule, separate Lok Sabha seats for Leh and Kargil districts and job reservation for locals. They describe the demands as key to protecting Ladakh's identity, culture and the fragile environment. The Centre appears to be in a bind as the two committees it appointed to reassure the local populations have made little headway in the last two years. In fact the second committee appointed this year under Minister of State for Home Nityanand Rai has only deepened local anger, as it has no mandate to address the issues being raised. Ladakh witnessed [a major military incursion from China in 2020](#), just 10 months after J&K's special status was scrapped and the erstwhile State divided. That conflict remains unresolved. In the absence of drastic measures to assuage the locals by meeting their genuine demands, the region will only remain embroiled to the advantage of those intent on fomenting trouble.

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